

The Knowledge Bank at The Ohio State University

Ohio State Engineer

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The Engineer's Bookshelf . . .

By WILSON R. DUMBLE

SHORTLY after lunch, one day several weeks ago, I sat in my office talking to three wounded soldiers; two had walked in on crutches, while the third hobbled about with a cane. All had been former students who had sat in my classes about two years ago and now they were home on leaves from hospitals in this country where they were getting treatment. One had been injured while fighting in Sicily, another while participating in a raid at Tobruck last January, and the third while struggling through swamps with the advancing American troops in New Guinea.

After the usual hearty greetings—indeed I was glad to see them—the four of us settled down to a full hour of good solid conversation. At least, I thought that it would be good solid conversation. However, to my amazement, after the first five minutes when I learned the extent of their injuries, the dialogue—and it was dialogue between the three soldiers because I sat in on it only as an auditor—turned into one of the finest bull sessions I have heard since my days many years ago at Camp Sherman. For the moment, the serious business of war was forgotten; and the wisecracks and the jokes and the fun of life on transport, in camp, and on foreign soil came with such swiftness and genuine honesty, I was indeed sorry when the bell rang dragging me off to the pedagogical duties of teaching a class.

When I left these three men I told them that I had just finished reading a slim little volume that I knew would delight their hearts, because I realized that making wisecracks is still an art at which American soldiers excell.

Now, no one denies that war is a very serious business; however, that does not stop American soldiers from making jokes whenever there is an opportunity to make jokes. And if there is nothing else to laugh at but themselves, they can do that too.

One of the best examples I have seen of soldiers' humor is a new book called *C/O POSTMASTER*, written and illustrated by Corporal Thomas R. St. George.

About five o'clock one spring morning in 1942, Cpl. St. George tells us, a group of young men were routed out of their California barracks and told to get their equipment together. They thought that maybe they were being sent back to Iowa; it did not occur to any of them that they were sufficiently seasoned to be headed overseas. Then, they were given those ominous postal cards to

sign, addressed to "Next of Kin", bearing the laconic phrase, "arrived safely at destination". When they were told their mail address henceforth would be "c/o Postmaster, San Francisco", they knew definitely that they were to go out of the country.

Most of the story *C/O POSTMASTER* deals with the actions—and the reactions—of these typically American boys when they arrived, much to their surprise, "down under" in Australia. It came as a revelation to them at first that many of the things they had always considered necessities of life were unheard of in Australia: modern plumbing, coca cola, and one hundred per cent hamburgers. Many familiar things had new and strange names. *Hot biscuits* were "scones"; *hard candies* were "lollies"; a dish of *ice cream*, when they could find it, was known as "*an ice*". The Yanks were treated as conquering heroes when they arrived. Little boys followed them around pleading for a button from their uniforms or the butt of an American cigarette; and the girls were friendly to them.

It was difficult not to brag a bit, encouraged as they were on every hand. There was the time, for instance, when the boys were invited to tea by a Minister of the Gospel. Under the influence of the Minister's sympathy they grew expansive. They told him of their adventures on the convoy on the high seas, and how they had literally come through by the skin of their teeth, being a bare thousand miles away from the Coral Sea battle shortly after it was all over. After the boys had talked themselves out, the Minister casually mentioned that he had been on Rabaul when the Japs landed there. Escaping inland with three other missionaries, he had crossed the island on foot and got away in an open boat, the target of a large portion of the Japanese Air Force.

On the way home the boys talked the matter over and decided that what they had often heard was true: Americans talk too much. "Not that we shut up", writes the author; "we merely agreed that it was true and went right on talking".

When the Yanks had become expert at shaving *with cold water without* a mirror, they began to feel that they were indeed veterans. The facilities in their camp, says the Corporal, were to their way of thinking all just shortly on this side of the Pleistocene Period. The Aussies felt differently, however. By their standards the Amer-

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THE ENGINEER'S BOOKSHELF

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ican camp was "the best bloomin' cimpe in Australia, a resort place, that's wot she is!" And when American army cots arrived they looked in wonderment. "A bloody bed", they murmured.

Let me quote a paragraph or two detailing one incident. Claiming that the small town near their camp boasted of only one hotel, Cpl. St. George tells how some two hundred soldiers, on their first evening, crowded into the hotel's one public room.

"This was a small room, flanked by a bar that had no stools, with a fireplace instead of a juke box, and posters on the walls that advertised the next running of the Grand National Surrey Race instead of Henry Bussey's Saturday appearance. On shelves behind the bar were perhaps a bare dozen bottles of various shapes and sizes. One of us (a Harvard man) pointed out that such an array was "English" and not to be confused with the vulgar displays of quantities of bottles usually found in American bars. Another soldier (no Harvard man, he) asked scornfully of the bar tender, 'Is that all yu' got?'"

"The bar tender, poor man, didn't attempt an answer. He didn't have time. More or less

feebly assisted by three nondescript females he scattered up and down the bar in a vain but valiant effort to cope with such unprecedented rush of business. Undoubtedly he had never seen anything like it before in all his life. To make matters worse, he must needs change dollars and cents to pounds and shillings with every transaction, a task with which he was mentally unfitted to cope, so continually referred to one of the females; the one who was bright enough to tell innumerable soldiers—whether truthfully or not, I couldn't say—that she was a married woman, the wife of a large man with a violent temper who might wander into the bar at any moment.

"We succeeded, finally, in obtaining a glass of something which the Harvard man claimed was "old ale" and the label insisted was 'XXXX Bitter Beer'. I decided it was certainly bitter if nothing else, and went off in search of some ice cream with a soldier who had last thought of the English in connection with the Boston Tea Party. Our connoisseur of 'old ale', however, stayed in the pub and eventually became quite drunk in a manner that left some doubt as to the exact advantages after all, of a Harvard education".

Now, you can understand why I recommend C/O POSTMASTER to my wounded-soldier callers.